

A close-up photograph of a fox squirrel resting on a thick, textured tree branch. The squirrel is facing right, with its head slightly lowered. Its fur is a mix of brown, tan, and grey. The background is a blurred forest scene with green foliage and tree trunks.

A fox squirrel – the one found in the wild, not your back yard – makes for a challenging quarry.

Alone in the Woods

By Ron Wilson

To the majority, we're likely regarded as a couple clowns short of a circus for ignoring, no matter how temporarily, North Dakota's more celebrated wild game for tree squirrels.

We can live with that assessment – and probably resemble it to some degree – because it means our plan of having the woods to ourselves to hunt an underrated quarry is working.

You can't toss a ring-necked rooster starting the second weekend in October without hitting another hunter wading through North Dakota's grasslands and cattails. Yet, for roughly four months during the state's squirrel season, if a tree does fall, we'll be part of a pretty small crowd, comparatively speaking, who will likely hear it.

On average, only about 2,000 people hunt squirrels in North Dakota each season. That's roughly 105,000 fewer hunters than those who chased pheasants in the state in 2007.

My hunting partner and I are deeply rooted in both camps, and it's fair to say we spend many more hours in the field pursuing grouse and pheasants than we do peering into trees. It's just that fall wouldn't be fall if we didn't tiptoe through the woods now and again hoping for a fox squirrel to make a mistake en route, we trust, to our cast iron frying pan.

Of the three squirrel species found in North Dakota, the fox is the largest (a big one weighs about 2 pounds), followed by the gray and red squirrel. The fox squirrel is found throughout the state, and is the most common squirrel along the Missouri River and draws and river bottoms of western North Dakota. It's also the only squirrel species we see while hunting, save for the odd gray squirrel.

Turns out, the fox squirrel hasn't been around North Dakota forever. It was first reported in the state in about 1925, but not in the Bismarck area until nearly a quarter-century later. The animal is believed to have expanded into the state from South Dakota.

When we do decide it's time to eschew sharp-tailed grouse and pheasants for a walk in the woods, the biggest hurdle is throttling back the pace we've been keeping behind hard-running bird dogs. We often remind ourselves that if we're moving faster than the grocery store checkout line, then we need to slow down. Hunting squirrels is a lot like still-hunting for bigger game, except your attention is focused three stories up instead of on the ground floor.

In a favorite chunk of woods that is maybe 100 yards long, we can spend an hour or more making it from one end to the other. We stop often, sitting on logs, or

leaning against trees, looking and listening. When we do decide to move, sometimes it's just to the other side of the log or tree. This change of position, no matter how minor, many times provides an entirely new perspective. What simply looked like a knot on a tree limb turns out to be the head of a squirrel, or what looked like peeling bark is a squirrel's tail waving lightly in the breeze.

Biologists tell us that tree squirrels see in only shades of black and white, but they have sharp eyesight, enabling them to detect even the slightest movements. Package that with keen senses of smell and hearing – and the frustrating custom of keeping a tree limb or trunk between them and you – and you sort of get the idea of what you're up against.

While squirrels in the wild and those in your backyard are physically carbon copies of one another, that's where the similarities end. The boldness urban squirrels demonstrate by hanging upside down off bird feeders while your dogs manically pogo stick

within inches doesn't play in the country. Instead, after minutes of looking at the same darn limb because you thought you saw something, the walnut-sized head of a squirrel finally reveals itself, providing you with a shot, albeit a difficult one.

In early autumn before the leaves fall, giving the hunter a better view into the world of the tree squirrel, the pursuit can be its most difficult. There's too much cover and too many distractions as leaves rattle in the wind and change colors with the shifting sun.

But, man, it's a nice time to be in the woods. So you clear the debris from the base of a tree with your hunting boot and settle in, noting that you're sitting in what could pass for a buck scrape. Before long you drift off and wonder what it is that brought you here in the first place? Then you hear the single .22-caliber crack from your partner's way and remember.

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The squirrel hunter's focus is typically many feet up, not on the ground.

